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fact sheet

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HIV/AIDS: A Brief Outline

WHAT IS HIV & AIDS?

HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus which attacks the body's natural defences, restricting the body's ability to fight disease.

A person with HIV is more likely to contract certain infections and cancers which are normally kept in control by a healthy Immune System.

HIV is present in blood, vaginal secretions or semen. Everyone who gets the virus can give it to others through un-protected penetrative sex or sharing needles and syringes.

The virus attacks different cells in the body whose job it is to fight off infection, specifically the white blood cells known as the T helper (or CD4) cell. The virus attacks the cell where it lives and hides.

AIDS Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is the condition which may occur as a result of contracting the HIV virus.

AIDS is therefore a condition in which progressive damage to the immune system occurs which makes people more vulnerable to developing certain illnesses.

HOW IS HIV TRANSMITTED?

A person can become infected through the following:

- Un-protected, penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) with an infected person.
- Small amounts of blood, semen and vaginal secretions may pass from person to person during sexual contact allowing the virus to enter the body.
- Sharing needles/syringes/equipment with an infected drug user.
- Mothers who have the virus passing it on to their babies before or during birth and possibly through breast milk.
- Blood transfusion if the donor is infected, however this is extremely unlikely as all blood donors are screened for HIV infection within the U.K.

HOW YOU CANNOT CATCH HIV

- X Insect bites
- X Dogs, cats and other domestic animals
- X Tears/saliva

A PERSON CANNOT GET HIV THROUGH EVERYDAY SOCIAL CONTACT.

- X shaking/holding hands
- X kissing
- X the toilet seat
- X sharing cutlery/crockery
- X coughing and sneezing

STEPS TO TAKE TO PROTECT YOURSELF

- Do not have un-protected anal or vaginal sex - always use a condom.
- Remember to check the kite mark that proves that the condoms have reached the British safety standard and the expiry date.
- If you need to use a lubricant with a condom, use a water soluble one like KY Jelly. Oil based lubricants like Vaseline or oil can damage the condom.
- Oral sex is believed to be even safer than penetrative sex with a condom.
- Do not share needles, syringes and equipment if you use drugs.

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